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Rethinking Refugees as Economically Isolated: The Rohingyas Participation in Informal Economy in Klang Valley, Malaysia

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Abstract

Unlike economic migrants, the refugee population is often portrayed as a burden to hosting government. They are seen to be economically passive, and highly dependent on the generosity of the hosting government and international organizations. In Malaysia, the refugee population including the Rohingyas is not living in sprawling tents, isolated villages or any refugee settlement in remote areas. They live in semi-urban and major city areas in search of economic opportunities – to make a living while waiting for durable solutions accorded to them. The absence of the right to work, coupled with the mounting pressure to make a living forces the Rohingyas to engage in informal economy, by undertaking various types of occupation and income-generating activities albeit risks of arrest and exploitation. This study aims to analyze the relationship between the Rohingyas participation in informal economy and their livelihood activities in the country. Resulting from two series of field works engaging the Rohingyas in Klang Valley between 2013 and 2016, the study found that despite the absence of their right to work, the Rohingya respondents persistently entered into informal labor market as temporary, unskilled and low wage workers in various sectors such as trade, services and automotive. For the self-employed Rohingya respondents, they tend to engage in small-scale and unregulated income generating activities. The active participation of the Rohingya respondents in informal economy has collectively strengthened their social interactions, influenced their ways of life, and increased their contribution towards community development. This study hence argues that the Rohingyas active participation in informal economy is an attempt to be independent or to be less dependent on the UNHCR assistance and government generosity in order to create and maintain their livelihood activities. This debunks the misconception that the Rohingya population in Malaysia is physically and economically isolated from the domestic economic structure.

Key words: *Rohingya, refugees, informal economy and livelihood*

Introduction

Generally, refugees in Malaysia are not allowed to enter labor market in any sectors of economy. This restriction applies to all refugee population in Malaysia including the Rohingyas, in which majority of them (70%) are residing urban areas (Equal Rights Trust, 2014; Kassim, 2015). Due to mounting pressure to make a living coupled with limited access to humanitarian aids, the Rohingyas are persistently entering the informal sectors, undertaking a variety of occupations and income-generating activities – albeit risks of arrest by enforcement personnel, and various forms of exploitation by unscrupulous employers and local community (Equal Rights Trust, 2014; Wake & Cheung, 2016; Hoffstaedter, 2016). Existing studies also indicate that due to the absence of their right to work, the Rohingyas are working in hazardous, poorly paid and with no protection working environment (Equal Rights Trust, 2014; Kassim, 2015; Wake & Cheung, 2016; Hoffstaedter, 2016).

This study aims to analyze the relationship between the Rohingyas participation in informal economy and their livelihood strategies. In particular, this study seeks to explain how their involvement in informal economy would enable and strengthen their livelihood activities in Malaysia. Prior to analyze this symbiotic relationship, it is important first to understand the Rohingyas participation in informal economy. For the Rohingyas who are employed in informal economy, this study aims to understand the types of occupation they engage, wages, period of employment, number of working hours, availability of social protection as well as their skills and working experience. For the Rohingyas who run their own income

generating activities (or self-employed Rohingyas), it is important to understand the way they run their activities including the size of their business operation, sectors, income and the hiring of workers or assistants. To best address the variety of factors contributing to the Rohingyas participation in informal economy and their livelihood activities, this study refers to the broad-based livelihood framework as advocated by Chambers and Conway (1991).

Research Method

This study adopts triangulation research method, combining three research techniques, namely a survey, an in-depth interview and a focus group discussion. The use of triangulation research method has enabled the author to crosscheck information and to relate them when analyzing the relationship between the Rohingyas participation in informal economy and their livelihood.

The primary findings in this study are derived from two series of field works conducted in 2013 and 2016. The first series of field work was conducted in 2013, targeting the Rohingyas residing in Klang Valley (Kuala Lumpur and Selangor), the central region of Peninsular Malaysia. Klang Valley is the most populated area among the Rohingyas in Peninsular Malaysia (Kassim, 2015, p. 183). A total of 48 Rohingya respondents were surveyed and interviewed between 2 January 2013 and 30 April 2013. This study used purposive sampling technique to determine respondents with the assistance of Rohingyas' community-based organizations (CBOs) in Klang Valley.

The second phase of the field work was undertaken between June and August 2016, targeting Rohingya community

leaders and activists in Klang Valley. A total of 10 interview sessions were conducted, using semi-structured interview questions. For the purpose of this study, only selected interview scripts relevant to this study were used. For security reasons and to prevent any unintended consequences, the personal details of the respondents and key informants have been kept anonymous and their names replaced.

Informal Economy, Refugees Livelihood & the Rohingyas in Malaysia

Informal Economy in Malaysia

The 1993's Resolution of the 15th International Conference of Labor Statisticians defines that persons employed in at least one informal sector enterprises – regardless of their status of employment, and whether it was their main or second job – are considered to be in informal economy (Husmanns, 2004). According to International Labor Organization's (ILO, 2015), activities in informal economy may include enterprises who are unregistered under specific forms of national legislation, small-scale in terms of workforce involved, private unincorporated enterprises, no complete accounts available, goods and services produced for sale or barter as well as engage in non-agricultural activities.

In Malaysia, informal economy includes informal sector enterprises that are not registered under the Companies Commission of Malaysia (CCM), and with less than 10 workers (Institute of Labor Market Information & Analysis, 2015). Agricultural sector and any other activities related to agriculture that are operating for their own consumption are nevertheless excluded from the definition of informal sector in Malaysia.

Meanwhile, informal wage employment refers to all jobs that lack contractual rights, legal status, social protection, health benefits and labor law privileges (Institute of Labor Market Information & Analysis, 2015).

Official information on informal economy in Malaysia is captured through the Malaysia's labor force survey (LFS) conducted by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOS) on an annual basis. It was first captured in 2012. In 2012, it was estimated that one million individuals participated in informal non-agricultural activities (UNDP, 2013, p. 96). The key measure for gauging employment in the informal economy is the total number (actual) of persons employed in various informal sectors, as well as in percentage of the non-agricultural employed workforce.

Information on informal economy can be further disaggregated by gender, age group, educational attainment, status of employment, industry, state, and strata. While these data may be further disaggregated by type of citizenship (between citizen of Malaysia and non-citizen), but it cannot be disaggregated by the different types of non-citizens such as migrant workers, domestic workers and refugees – among the non-citizen participants.

Refugees Livelihood and Livelihood Framework

Participation in informal economy is one of the very important livelihood strategies for many segments of society. Yet, it is not the only aspect to consider when it comes to refugee population. Crisp (2003) stressed that refugee livelihoods are the issue of their fundamental human rights, fundamental liberty and protection. In fact, human

rights and livelihood are complementing each other (De Vriese, 2006). In other words, respect for refugee rights would strengthen their livelihood.

Other studies also indicated that the absence of civil, social, and economic rights is the key root causes that restrict refugees to establish or maintain their livelihood (Jacobsen, 2002). In many parts of the world, refugees suffer from the lack of their right to freedom of movement, freedom of speech, fair trial, decent work, and access to education and health-care treatment (De Vriese, 2006).

Self-employment is another common livelihood strategy among the refugee population. In Uganda, for instance, the provision of agricultural land to select refugee groups by the Government of Uganda to develop the land has resulted in refugee population become productive members of their community, and subsequently contributed in national development and poverty alleviation (Sebba, 2005). In Kenya, existing studies indicate that the limited freedom of movement coupled with the absence of access to agricultural land have caused many refugee population involved in informal sector (Jamal, 2000; Horst, 2001).

The above literatures illustrate the complexity of livelihood issues facing refugees from around the world. Even when refugees are legally allowed to work, it does not guarantee their employment due to poor economic conditions in certain countries. In countries where refugees are formally recognized, xenophobia and prejudice towards refugees, remoteness of refugees settlement, language barriers, lack of skills - collectively impede them from meaningfully participate in the labor market (De Vriese, 2006).

There are existing livelihood frameworks used predominantly by development actors such as Oxfam, Migration Policy Institute (MPI) and Transatlantic Council on Migration to study various forms of strategy used by the refugee population in order to sustain their livelihood in urban and rural settings. Other intergovernmental organizations have their respective livelihood framework and strategy dealing specifically with different segments of society. The livelihood framework of the UNHCR, for instance, is defined broadly to include activities that allow refugees to cope with, and to recover from stress and shocks, to maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets to provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation (De Vriese, 2006, p. 3).

De Vriese (2006) notes that most refugee households do not limit their livelihood strategies, but rather diversify such activities attempting to make the most opportunities available to them. De Vriese (2006), groups the common livelihood strategies employed by the refugee population into nine core activities, namely; (i) seeking international protection as a livelihood strategy; (ii) receiving humanitarian assistance; (iii) relying on social networks and solidarity; (iv) rural refugee livelihoods - falling back on subsistence farming; (v) urban refugee livelihood; (vi) engaging in trade and services; (vii) investing in education and skills training; (viii) falling back on negative coping strategies; and (ix) adopting new gender roles.

Despite the growing number of literatures concerning refugee livelihoods across the globe, there is no mutually accepted livelihood framework that could be adequate given the varying

circumstances and challenges facing the refugee population in different context of destination and transit countries. According to Chambers and Conway (1991), a sustainable livelihood means the capability of individual, or household to cope with and to recover from stress and shock; to maintain and enhance their capabilities and assets; and a means used to maintain and sustain their life. Although they clearly distinguish the components of livelihood framework into three categories, namely the capability, asset and activities for a means of living – there is a potential overlap between these categories. Hence, this study refers to a broad-based livelihood framework as advocated by Chambers and Conway (1991), without categorizing them into the three components. This serves as the conceptual guidance, and would enable the study to contextualize the issues and activities employed by the Rohingyas in Klang Valley, resulting from their participation in informal economy.

Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia

At the outset, the term “refugee” is a legally defined status in international refugee law, and as such, owing particular status and rights as enshrined in the 1951 Refugee Convention. According to the convention, refugee is defined as, “...owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion... is outside the country of his nationality...” However, as Malaysia has yet to accede to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, the term ‘refugee’ and rights stipulated under such convention are not recognized.

As a non-state party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the existing national laws including the Malaysian Immigration Act 1959/63 – do not distinguish between

the undocumented immigrants (or irregular migrants) and refugees. As of the end of October 2016, a total of 150,669 refugees and asylum seekers from various countries of origin were registered by the UNHCR in Malaysia (UNHCR, 2016). This includes a total of 54,856 Rohingyas. Under the Immigration Act 1959/63, the Rohingyas and other refugee population, regardless of their refugee status are considered as “undocumented migrants”, and punishable by a fine not exceeding RM10,000 (approximately US\$ 2,500) and/or maximum of five years of imprisonment, and up to six strokes of cane.

As a result of continued persecution and discrimination facing the Rohingyas back in the Arakan state of Myanmar, (Ullah, 2011; Azharudin & Azlinariah, 2012; Equal Rights Trust, 2014), the Rohingyas persistently risk their lives crossing international borders in order to seek asylum in neighboring countries such as Bangladesh, Thailand and Malaysia. In Malaysia, the historical presence of the Rohingyas could be traced as early as 1970s (Kassim, 2015). Other studies indicated that the first Rohingyas arrival may be between late 1970s and early 1980s (Letchamanan, 2015; Irish Centre for Human Rights, 2010).

The Rohingyas are only found in Peninsular Malaysia, mainly in the states such as Kuala Lumpur, Selangor and Penang (Kassim, 2015, p. 183). For the new arrivals of Rohingyas, they tend to live in an ambulatory lifestyle, moving from one place to another in search of employment or any income generating activities. A study published by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in 2012 showed that arrest and detention resulting from the lack of proper travel document among refugee population in Malaysia is rampant

(Smith, 2012), and that inevitably lead the Rohingyas to adjust their lifestyle, social participation and appearance in public areas.

The presence of UNHCR office in Malaysia has not always been regarded as helpful by certain groups of refugee population in the country. While some refugees view UNHCR as a source of help, others tend to consider them as being unhelpful and toothless to advocate the rights of refugees (Wake & Cheung, 2016). Such views derived partly due to the lack of access among certain groups of refugees to many UNHCR services and livelihood programs such as refugee registration, resettlement program, medical services, health insurance, community grant and educational opportunity.

The existing social network such as the Rohingyas' CBOs plays very important role to fill the protection gaps due to the limited role of the UNHCR as well as the absence of the governmental protection. In general, the Rohingyas' CBOs provide informal protection, livelihood support, shelter, lending or giving money and finding informal jobs for the Rohingyas in Malaysia (Wake & Cheung, 2016). However, such voluntary services often inadequate due to financial incapability, poor administration, lack of leadership and education among the Rohingya community leaders and activists.

The Rohingyas Participation in Informal Economy

A total of 48 Rohingya refugees and asylum seekers were surveyed between 2 January 2013 and 30 April 2013. 17 respondents (35.4%) are employed and self-employed in various sectors (refer Table 1). However the vast majority, 31

respondents (64.6%) are unemployed. Despite the availability of many employment and income-generating opportunities in urban and semi-urban areas, this study found high rate of unemployment among the Rohingyas in Klang Valley. The study also found that the majority of the unemployed respondents are the new arrivals of Rohingyas who arrived in Malaysia between one and three years (between the years 2010 and 2012). As the new arrivals, these unemployed Rohingya respondents hold neither UNHCR card nor asylum claim letter, and have limited ability to speak local language, making it difficult for them to find employment.

Given the absence of the right to work among refugees in Malaysia, the Rohingyas participation in all types of occupation and sectors of economy (as shown in Table 1) are considered to be "informal employment", making them liable to varying penalties under various domestic laws such as Immigration Act 1959/63, Employment Act 1995 and Companies Act 1965. However, often enforcement personnel turned a blind eye when they receive report or encounter with the Rohingyas who are illegally working, or running their unauthorized businesses, while some other unscrupulous enforcement personnel would take the opportunity to extort them. It is generally observed that public awareness and sympathy among Malaysian citizens towards the Rohingya population in the country has been steadily growing recently. It may be due to the extensive media coverage concerning human rights exploitation facing Rohingyas in Myanmar, and the influx of the Rohingya boat people in various countries in the region, including Malaysia.

On the aspect of income, there are two key observations can be made. First, there are two Rohingya respondents (12%) inform that they have received monthly income between RM500 and RM1,000 (refer Table 1). This suggests that despite having the opportunity to get employed, their monthly income has not reached the minimum wage as set by the Government of Malaysia in 2016 (RM1,000 per month or above). Secondly, all self-employed Rohingya respondents (eight respondents or 47% of the total 17 respondents) have received a monthly income of RM1,500 and above. This suggests that self-employment offers relatively higher income, well beyond minimum wage in comparison to the employed Rohingyas.

For most of the employed Rohingya respondents, their monthly income is determined by their hard work, willingness and ability to work overtime. For example, one Rohingya respondent informs that his monthly income is determined based on how many extra working hours he works during regular days, and working overtime during public holidays (Rafee, personal communication, 14 July, 2013). As a kitchen assistant in a Malay-owned restaurant in Kuala Lumpur, Rafee can easily receive between RM1,400 and RM1,500 a month.

Apart from income, informal employment of the Rohingyas in Malaysia has a symbiotic relationship with other critical issues. One of them is the irregular nature of their employment. This study found that all Rohingya respondents who are employed (nine respondents) – are considered to be undocumented workers given the fact that they do not possess a legally recognized travel document and working permit as required under the Immigration Act 1959/63. The irregular nature of their employment leads to other

labour rights issues such as the absence of social benefits, compensation and protection from any forms of labour exploitation. This study also found that there are Rohingya respondents (two respondents) who are employed on a seasonal or temporary basis. For instance, one Rohingya respondent who works as a general cleaner at Kajang Municipal Council (Selangor) is only hired when his service is required. This type of occupation often being temporary, and lasts for a short period (between six and twelve months).

Majority Rohingya respondents also inform that they prefer to work at a place nearby their neighborhood. They work for 12 to 14 hours a day. Some Rohingya respondents inform that they work overtime without proper overtime pay given to them. In addition to that, there is no social protection provided including insurance coverage and compensation in any case of injury. Despite the absence of academic and vocational (technical) certificates, some Rohingya respondents inform that they are hired for technical positions in sectors such as automotive and construction. Their capabilities in these technical positions are built upon self-learning or their previous working experiences either in Malaysia, Myanmar or any transit countries such as Thailand and Bangladesh.

This study also uncovered that some self-employed Rohingya respondents are involved in unregulated income generating activities, which are not legally registered with the authorities such as Companies Commission of Malaysia (CCM) and district councils, whose portfolios are dedicated to register and provide licenses to businesses to operate within their respective territory.

Table 1. Type of Occupation by Sector, Status of Employment and Estimated Monthly Income among Rohingya Respondents

Type of Occupation	Respondents (No. / %)	By Sectors	Status of Employment*	No. of Respondents according to their Estimated Monthly Income			
				RM500 - RM1,000	RM1,001 - RM1,500	RM1,501 - RM2,000	RM2,001 & above
Grocery / Wet Market Assistant	3 (18%)	Trade	Employee	1	2		
Food Stall / Restaurant Assistant	3 (18%)	Trade	Employee	1	2		
General cleaner	1 (6%)	Service	Employee		1		
Workshop Worker (Small Scale)	1 (6%)	Automotive	Employee		1		
Community Worker / Teacher	1 (6%)	Service	Employee		1		
Grass Cutter	2 (12%)	Service	Self-Employed		1	1	
Recycle Items Collector	3 (18%)	Trade	Self-Employed		1	1	1
Sub-Contractor	1 (6%)	Construction	Self-Employed				1
Informal Money Transfer Agent	1 (6%)	Trade	Self-Employed				1
Grocery Trader	1 (6%)	Trade	Self-Employed				1
Sub-Total				2 (12%)	9 (53%)	2 (12%)	4 (24%)
Total	17 Respondents (100%)						

Source: Survey 2013

This study also found that there are Rohingya respondents who have been renting trading license from local traders. For instance, Ahmad, a Rohingya refugee informs that he runs a grocery trading, and pays about RM350 per month to a Malay businessman who has kindly offered his trading license for him to run his grocery shop (Ahmad, personal communication, 13 July, 2013).

Rohingya respondents also inform that many of them involve in small-scale income generating activities. To run these economic activities, they require start-up capital sufficient to start their business. In some cases, Rohingya respondents manage to access microfinance facility offered by various non-governmental organizations – in order to start their economic activities. However, majority of them borrow money from relatives and friends. For Rohingya respondents who have started their small-scale economic activities, they hire between two and five workers – mostly among the Rohingya refugees themselves, or other refugee groups from Myanmar such as Burmese Muslim, as well as members of other migrant communities (for example, Indonesian migrant workers).

Apart from providing work opportunity to the Rohingyas, and other groups of migrant community, the Rohingya respondents who are self-employed also offer their goods and services well beyond the needs for the Rohingya community. In other words, their end-products and end-services are offered to a larger extent of consumers consisting of other migrant groups as well as local population. For example, Ahmad sells his grocery items to migrant workers from Indonesia and Bangladesh, as well as the

members of local community who are residing nearby their neighborhood at Sri Kembangan, Selangor (Ahmad, personal communication, 13 July, 2013). Another Rohingya respondent informs that he has been providing his grass cutting service to the members of local community mainly in the housing areas and government facilities such as schools and government buildings in various locations such as Kajang, Puchong and Serdang in Selangor (Syawal, personal communication, 27 June, 2013).

Rohingyas Participation in Informal Economy and their Livelihood Activities

The previous section has discussed the participation of Rohingya respondents in informal economy. This section analyzes the relationship between their active participation in informal economy and day-to-day livelihood. By referring to the broad-based livelihood framework as advocated by Chambers and Conway (1991), this study found that their active participation in informal economy has strengthened social interactions (remittances, access to education for their children, administrative activities and faith-based / welfare activities), influenced their ways of life (access to healthcare, formation of family), and increased contributions towards community development (entrepreneurship).

Remittances

The active participation of the Rohingya respondents in informal economy has enabled them to support the livelihood of their parents and family members who are still in the Arakan state of Myanmar or in transit countries such Bangladesh and Thailand - through remittances. Many

Rohingyas in Malaysia still have their parents or siblings live in the Arakan state of Myanmar or in other transit countries such as Thailand, Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia. The ability to remit money to their parents means they are able to maintain such relationship by supporting their parents and family members' daily expenditure, schooling of their children and healthcare treatment.

Muhamad Kasim, a Rohingya respondent informs that he usually remits about RM5,000 on average every year, in one or two transactions (Muhamad Kasim, personal communication, 22 February, 2013). The money he remits will be used by his parents to purchase daily needs, medical and livestock. Muhamad Kasim notes that RM2,500 is sufficient to maintain his parents' annual expenditure, unless there is a case of emergency that requires additional financial support. Sending money back home is relatively safe. A few options that the Rohingyas can choose to send money back home. These include remittance through informal money transfer agents (individuals), formal banking institutions (such as AYA Bank) and money transfer through non-banking institutions such as Western Union (Rafique, personal communication, 23-25 July, 2016).

Access to Education

Income received by the Rohingya respondents has enabled them to support and maintain the informal education of their children. All refugee children in Malaysia including the Rohingyas are not eligible to enter formal schooling due to administrative restriction. As of January 2015, there were a total of 126 informal learning centers across Peninsula Malaysia

(UNICEF, 2015). A total of 31 learning centers were dedicated for Rohingya children with minimal cost of educational fee between RM20 and RM50 for each Rohingya child per month.

Most Rohingya parents send their children to Rohingyas learning centers located nearby to their neighborhood for many reasons. Among them is to reduce transportation cost. For Rohingya parents who have more than one child, they would have to bear more educational cost for their children such as school fees, transportation, foods and other educational learning materials. According to Rafique, some Rohingya children has dropped out from attending learning centers after a few years of learning because parents lost their job and subsequently unable to cover the cost of their children education (Rafique, personal communication, 23-25 July, 2016). Hence, wages or any forms of income received by the Rohingya parents are pivotal to ensure they are able to support and maintain the educational expenditure for their children in Malaysia.

Administrative Activities

Income received by the Rohingya respondents is also used to cover their administrative expenditures in dealing with UNHCR office in Kuala Lumpur, as well as other administrative matters with government agencies such as Immigration Department and Royal Malaysian Police (RMP). Generally, the Rohingyas in Malaysia are expected to cover the cost of various administrative matters such as registration of refugee status and interview for resettlement – which require more than one-time walk-in (physical visit) to the UNHCR office in Bukit Petaling, Kuala

Lumpur. However, most Rohingyas in Klang Valley reside at the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur and Selangor – and hence require substantive transportation costs to enable them to travel to the city center where UNHCR office is located.

In addition to the physical visit to UNHCR office in Kuala Lumpur, some Rohingya respondents use email and fax to apply refugee status (Aslam, personal communication, 25 July, 2016). This can be done before or after their physical visit to UNHCR office. If their refugee status application is not responded by the UNHCR office, the Rohingyas will usually bring the matter up to the attention of local NGOs – majority of which are also located geographically far-off from many Rohingya neighborhoods. This would require further transportation and communication costs for the Rohingyas to reach out to these NGOs.

For the Rohingya respondents who are requested for a walk-in interview at the UNHCR office – as part of their resettlement requirement, they are also expected to cover their own travel expenditures to Kuala Lumpur city center. These expenditures are varied from one refugee to another, depending on where they are temporarily residing, their period of resettlement interview and attendance for physical resettlement courses – for which require their frequent visit to UNHCR office in Kuala Lumpur.

Faith-Based and Welfare Activities

Income received by the Rohingya respondents is also used to enable them to participate and contribute in various faith-based and welfare activities. The Rohingyas in Malaysia are an active community,

engaging in various types of faith-based, welfare and community activities. These activities are often organized by, and within the Rohingya community itself, or in partnership with local NGOs and community. The Rohingyas participation in these activities would enable them to contribute to the community development and empowerment through religious-related events, social innovation and livelihood programs. They also utilize the same platforms to contribute financially to the Rohingya community in Malaysia, and in the Arakan state of Myanmar (Rafique, personal communication, 23-25 July, 2016).

Some Rohingya respondents take the advantage of these gatherings to share information on current issues in Myanmar, expand their network and strengthen solidarity among themselves. To meaningfully contribute in these activities, the Rohingyas are expected to contribute financially to the Rohingyas' CBOs, community leaders or representatives for community development and welfare purposes.

A Rohingya respondent notes that every each Rohingya in Malaysia has the social responsibility, and therefore is encouraged to contribute in the creation of emergency fund for the Rohingyas in the Arakan state of Myanmar (Jamal, personal communication, 29 July, 2016). Individual Rohingyas are also encouraged to contribute financially to any development programs for Rohingyas in Malaysia in order to reduce dependency to local and international NGOs to support their livelihoods in the country. Hence, employment and self-employment in informal sector is pivotal in ensuring continuous contribution of the Rohingyas to

support the community development in Malaysia, and their fellow Rohingyas who are still trapped in poverty and human rights persecutions back in the Arakan state of Myanmar.

Access to Healthcare

The Rohingyas active participation in informal economy has enabled them to purchase basic medicals and access healthcare treatment. Accessing healthcare treatment at government premises such as general hospitals and government clinics requires proper documentation such as UNHCR card or valid passport. Unable to show their UNHCR card or any other travel documents, Rohingyas may be denied to access any form of healthcare treatment at government facilities. Unlike government facilities, accessing private healthcare treatment is relatively easy for Rohingyas, even without proper travel documents on the basis of “everyone has the right to healthcare”. However, most Rohingyas are financially incapable to access healthcare treatment from private institutions due to the higher costs of healthcare treatment at private health institutions.

In 2013, the Ministry of Health (MOH), Malaysia released a circular indicating that all registered refugees with UNHCR including the Rohingyas are given 50% discount of healthcare treatment fee from the total fee imposed to non-nationals (<http://www2.moh.gov.my/circulars>). In the same circular, all refugees including the Rohingyas are also given the privilege to access healthcare treatment for free, but not more than RM400 (or US\$ 100). However, in this case, Rohingyas are required to get permission and official letter from the UNHCR prior to their visit to any

government health facilities. For Rohingya asylum seekers who have yet to get their refugee status from the UNHCR, they are required to pay similar fee imposed to non-nationals. Hence, wages and any form of income received by the Rohingya respondents are important to enable them to access healthcare treatment mainly at government facilities.

Formation of Family/Marriage

Income received by the Rohingya respondents is also pivotal to enable them to form a family through marriage especially for the Rohingya males. According to Kassim (Kassim, 2015, p. 188), marriage among the Rohingyas is a necessary union for Rohingya adult, men and women, preventing them from immoral activities and sexual misadventure.

Many Rohingyas prefer to marry within their own ethnic group especially between members of a kinship originated from the same village or districts (Rafique, personal communication, 23-25 July, 2016). However, due to the lack of Rohingya females in Malaysia, some Rohingyas are forced to spend huge amount of money in order to bring their future wife from the Arakan state of Myanmar, often through pre-arranged marriage by their respective family. The amount of money spent to bring a future wife from Myanmar to Malaysia may reach to RM20,000 (Kassim, 2015, p. 188). Hence, Rohingyas who intend to marry Rohingya women from Myanmar have to work harder, undertaking more than one job at one time – in order to raise money for his marriage.

Worth noting that despite the ability to form a family, the Rohingyas cannot

register their marriage in any relevant government agencies including the religious department in Malaysia. In other words, their marriage is not officially recognized by the Government of Malaysia. Most often, Rohingyas approach their respective community leaders and religious heads to proceed with their marriage, and hence issued with a marriage certificate by the Rohingya community.

Entrepreneurship

Many Rohingyas in Malaysia aspire to be entrepreneurs. It is in their blood, and they are talented, according to a Rohingya community leader (Rafique, personal communication, 23-25 July, 2016). However, not all Rohingyas are capable to achieve their dream to be an entrepreneur. Certainly, to become entrepreneurs, these individual Rohingyas need to have sufficient knowledge, skills and financial ability to enable them to run and maintain their business. In many cases, Rohingya entrepreneurs (respondents) begin by working informally in various informal sectors – to enable them to keep money as start-up capital, gain experience and a variety of skills such as the ability to speak local language, determine business opportunities and create relationship with the members of the local community, before running their own business.

According to Rafique, the Rohingyas usually think and act as entrepreneurs naturally (Rafique, personal communication, 23-25 July, 2016). They have the ability to communicate the local language very well, build relationship with local people and know how to negotiate and to take advantage of any business opportunities mainly in their neighborhood.

Rafique adds that the good relationship between the Rohingyas and the local community such as the head of villagers or members of local committees would enable them to set up and run their small businesses in the neighborhood, without much disruption by the local authority.

Another Rohingya respondent notes that changing a career from an employee in informal sector to become an entrepreneur requires financial capability, at least an amount of start-up capital, sufficient to set up and run his business (Mohd Karim, personal communication, 23 February 2013). According to Mohd Karim, he starts his recycling business with a RM2,000 start-up capital. The start-up capital is important to enable him to buy a used motorcycle from a local teacher – whom he works closely for a community project at his neighborhood. The motorcycle is an essential asset to enable him to transport his recycling items from various locations to recycling centers. Mohd Karim settlings in Malaysia for more than 10 years, fluent in local Malay language and has good relationship with the local community mainly the head of villagers, government servants and businessmen – that collectively facilitate his business activities at his neighborhood.

Another Rohingya respondent opens his grocery trading, with a limited start-up capital of RM3,000 in 2009 (Ahmad, personal communication, 23 February 2013). In order to run a grocery trading, Ahmad rents a trading license and a shop lot from a local businessman in Kajang, Selangor. Other than the Rohingyas themselves, local people from nearby neighborhood are also buying daily groceries from Ahmad's shop. Therefore, it is important for Ahmad to

speak local language fluently, and build good relationship with their customers.

To briefly conclude, these livelihood activities are the result of their active participation in informal economy. This study does not argue that the Rohingya refugees who are unable to participate in any informal economy, would unlikely to undertake these livelihood activities. But their participation is certainly limited. Additionally, this study concludes that these livelihood activities are complementary in nature, or else interlinked in a domino effect. For instance, a Rohingya who wants to be an entrepreneur would need a combined knowledge and skills (as their capability) and capital (as an asset) in order to start his business. This situation fits into the broad-based livelihood framework as suggested by Chambers and Conway (1991) earlier in this study.

Conclusion

The inability of the majority of the Rohingya respondents to participate in informal economy is due to many factors. This includes the absence of their right to employment, lack of knowledge, skills and social interaction, as well as their migration history (for example, the Rohingyas new arrivals). However, there are groups of Rohingya respondents who are able to participate in informal economy, undertaking various types of occupation and income generating activities – albeit risks of legal repercussion. This study reiterates the key findings of this study that their active participation in informal economy has enabled them to pursue their various livelihood activities such sending remittances; access to education;

administrative activities; faith-based and welfare activities; access to healthcare; formation of family; and entrepreneurship. These activities have collectively strengthened their social interactions, influenced their ways of life, and increased their contribution towards community development.

Their active participation in informal economy also suggests that these Rohingya respondents are making effort to be independent, or to be less dependent on assistance from the hosting government and international organizations such as the UNHCR - in order to pursue their livelihood activities. This indirectly debunks the misconception that the Rohingya population in Malaysia is physically and economically isolated from domestic economic structure. Although the Rohingyas are still squeezed into communal settlements, their participation in informal economy has benefited communities beyond their very own. This also suggests that their economic contribution goes beyond safeguarding their own livelihood, but to a larger extent, domestic economy and hosting community. Hence, the Rohingyas can be seen as an active population that value adds to the domestic economic development as well as to meet the communal market demands.

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